

## EXPERIENCE AND THE ESSENCE THAT REMAINS

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Ceramics.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPERIENCE AND THE ESSENCE THAT REMAINS

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The basis of my research and studio practice is to investigate the processes of creating and remembering and their significance for identity development and the subsequent perception of one's world. I argue that the development of the self is built upon our memory of the experiences we have had rather than the objects to which we identify ourselves.

Through my individual work in ceramics and collaborative sculptural engagement with others that acknowledge the ever-present condition of impermanence, my research focuses on experience and what remains after the original signifier (the object made) no longer exists. Experience and memory then become the attenuators of present moment perception, both of our world and of ourselves. This engagement emphasizes the process of making, the suggestion of remembered forms, and of energies that lead to dissolution.

My thesis will argue that through the act of creating, remembering is engaged as new memories are formed, and the experience supersedes the objects created. Ultimately, it is this experience and its memory, its residual essence, that the individual uses to construct the lens through which they see, and ultimately create, their world. Through this process I argue it is that

which we carry inside ourselves, our memory of our experiences, and not the things and memorabilia with which we surround ourselves, that create our individual worlds and ourselves.

## INTRODUCTION: THAT WHICH REMAINS

"What if the most powerful thing you can create is an experience that someone cannot forget?" Daniel J. Martinez, (Finkelpearl, p63).

As I work, I am pursued by questions. "What is informing what I am looking at right now? What is it in this moment that resonates with me? Why do I feel a connection to this?" In searching for the answers to these questions, my research has led to the exploration of the role of experience and memory, both in my private work and in my socially engaged work with others. In my private work which involves issues of identity, impermanence, and the dissolution of what is present in the moment, I can recognize the recurrence of themes, however abstract, that I can only attribute to my personal history. In collaborating with others, it is the experience of making, and the positive experience of engagement and connection that is most transformative, both for those I work with and for myself. This informs and contributes to a more expansive view of the world and of myself.

In looking deeply into that which has formed us as individuals, one can always point to parents, community, and the dominant culture to which one aligns oneself outside of the home, but that also inscribes the relationships that exist within the home in the family culture. It becomes difficult to broadly apply a causality to who we become as individuals since there can be such variance in what each person experiences during their development. And the process is never ending. We are constantly in a state of flux, in a process of development. New information is coming in, and we work to fit it to our world view, or we shift and expand our view to include the new information, or new perspective. Given this constantly changing environment, with its relentless tide of new information and an explosively developing media that bombards each of us, one is left to fit this frenzy of information into some sort of solid ground on which to stand.

This desire for solidity (and subsequent perceived stability) then follows down the readily recognizable cognitive pathways of confirmation bias (looking for new information to confirm our existing world view), Dunning-Kruger Effect (believing we know more than we actually do), and cognitive dissonance (an inability to assimilate new ideas due to conflicting information overload), all of which are governed by our previous experiences and the memories to which we choose to hold. Our histories; personal, communal, and cultural are the glasses we look through to determine our view of the world.

The common thread is experience. Memory is the valence which ties experiences together into a cohesive view, one that allows for navigating through a fluid and changing world. But memory is also a very slippery medium, one in which we are active participants creating and substantiating our histories and our view of ourselves. This personal agency (the choosing of what to focus on, and thereby reinforce and make stronger) is often disregarded or ignored. In addition, there is the subconscious with its deep-seated memories and impressions that inform our perceptions and the three cognitive factors above. My research began as an exploration to answer the question "What remains after that which was present is no longer there? If change is the underlying reality of human experience, what holds greater significance to who we are; the object we make? or the choice to make and experience of the making of that object?" While my search was deeply personal, it inevitably led to community, culture, and connection with others. What has been revealed is that both memory and the experience of making, are the tangible elements that inform our perceptions in a substantive way. Through personal agency, shared authorship, and collective engagement, experience can become the element of lasting value, even beyond the object that is created.



## CONTEXT: PARALLELS AND DIVERGENCIES

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a comprehensive history of participatory art, its driving objectives over time, and the major players and movements. But there are currents that run through its history, and these currents form both parallels and divergencies within the research presented. A common theme from the beginning of participatory art is that it has been intensely political. Whether pressing nationalistic fervor on the part of the Italian Futurists, or shared authorship in revolutionary propaganda after the Russian revolution, or the anti-ideology, anarchist message of the Dadaists, socially engaged art in the early part of the 20th century was driven by political objectives. Post-war groups such as Groupe Recherche d'Art, Jean Jacques Lebel and his followers, and the Situationists International espoused positions such as leftist technophilic populism, sexually liberated anarchism, and dogmatic, anti-visual Marxism, respectively. (Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p79). Movements such as Fluxus presented a duality of playful activation of the viewer/participant and also an undercurrent of political agendas such as presented in George Maciunas' manifesto. More recently, socially engaged art has involved a duality of ethics vs. aesthetic freedom, but there has been a shift. "The main emphasis of participation in art since the 1960's has been the activation of the viewer to a participant, the sharing of authorship, and the mending of the 'social bond'." (Bishop, *Participation*, p12).

In 1998, Nicolas Bourriaud published *Relational Aesthetics* in which he states: "There is nothing more absurd either than the assertion that contemporary art does not involve any political project, or than the claim that its subversive aspects are not based on any theoretical terrain." (Bourriaud, p14). Given the nature of human interaction, this may be true with regard to a flexible definition of the word "political". But coupled with the word "project", it suggests an agenda and an objective. But there is no agenda attached to the work of this research other than

those suggested by Claire Bishop, that of activating the viewer out of their passivity and giving them a stake in the work, their work, through shared authorship, and in 'mending the social bond', the research focuses on an engagement similar to that practiced by Rirkrit Tiravanija and emphasizes listening and connectivity. It seeks similarities while respecting and honoring differences.

Through working with others in an engagement of shared authorship, and with a spirit of cooperation, I have gained more than I have given way. In explaining my interest in engagement, someone once confronted me with the idea that I am trying to give to someone 'my' experience. I responded that that would not be possible. My interests are that the viewer, now engaged in a dialogue, would experience art not played out as a representation to be viewed, but as that which they are making by their own hands. A lot is being asked of them. I am asking them to engage in the making of a piece while not knowing the outcome, and frequently, with not even knowing me. We engage in the work together, talk, joke around a bit, and they share their thoughts. But in many ways their dialogue is not with me, it is with themselves. Often, they are confronted with how they see themselves, what they believe they can do (or can't), and what is possible. In that moment, often there is a subtle shift.

## OBJECTS EXPLORED AND QUESTIONED

My research and work have come full circle to a time before I entered this university. The work explores transitory experience and memory along two paths, the private, and the public. Through my research I have come to understand that personal narratives, however private, inform all aspects of what one perceives, and how one acts upon those perceptions. My own narrative, while not unique, would perhaps be considered somewhat atypical. Events being what they were, they led me to recognize and deeply understand how fleeting and ephemeral conditions and objects can be, and yet how tenacious memory can be. With regard to the private and the public, my private work at that time dealt with transitory, temporal conditions and my response to their fleeting and ephemeral qualities. In my public work, I lead teams in the building homes for Habitat for Humanity (47 in NC, MI, and VA), in hurricane reconstruction (Irma and Katrina), in post-earthquake construction (Haiti), and low-income housing remediation (Appalachia). Along more creative lines, I worked directly in art related projects to address issues important to me; housing insecurity through *The 100 Cup Challenge for Haiti* (throughout the US), and the problem of hunger through *Stone Soup* (Raleigh) and *Empty Bowls* (Sylva). It was not until I read Tom Finkelpearl's book *What We Made* that I came to realize I was actually engaged in a practice of art as social practice. In an interview with Tom Finkelpearl, Grant Kester states "You also have to attend to the quality and the form of social relations, circulation of power within a given site, and the ways in which power is contested or interrupted or redirected. Consciousness is being transformed at both the individual and collective level, and that's really what art's all about." (Finkelpearl, p123). I found that to be true. I was being transformed by the experience and so were those with whom I was engaged.

When I started in the MFA program here at Western Carolina University, my initial explorations began in a context of materiality and pushing through the limits of that materiality. Ceramics is an intensely material driven endeavor and as Tony Marsh, an international ceramics artist and educator based in California, states "Ceramics punishes risk takers with failure, and Ceramics rewards risk takers with failure"(NCECA, 2019). I began with simple vessel forms that focused on traditional ceramics values; functionality, form, and surface. Often the surfaces were intensely patterned using the multiple techniques of carving, etching, staining, and sgraffito (Figure 2). Patterns were mapped onto surfaces using lasers (Figure 1), becoming more articulated and obsessive. While I was pushing through limits, I came to understand that I was actually using those limits as a habitual boundary or zone. In a sense I was creating solidity when all I saw around me was impermanence. I was in a world of constant change, and yet I was holding on to "business as usual" through my habits of work.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

To convey the presence of impermanence and change in my work, I set about undermining traditional values of uniformity often associated with 'product' and instead sought to

actively destroy the pattern as it moved across the surface of the work (Figure 3). But this presence of pattern resisted destruction, and this resistance, or perhaps persistence, mirrored aspects of the human experience that are remembered in the body and memories held onto in the mind.

I increasingly saw my jars and vessels as metaphors for the body. These works grew in size and scope to a point where they would confront the viewer with a presence that matched the viewer's own bodily size, often larger than the viewers themselves (Figure 4). Their surfaces continued to be highly patterned, but the patterns were yielding to other conflicting surfaces such as cold finished painting that did not affirm the pattern, or foreign elements such as barbed wire encasing the vessel (Figure 5). These new elements were moving not only towards the destruction of surface pattern but also towards the visual obliteration of the object itself. And while the object remained, it could no longer be regarded in traditional 'pottery' contexts.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

My manipulations of the ceramic object created unease on the part of some viewers. In one sense, the objects conveyed a sense of power and monumentality. But the viewer was also

confronted with the work's fragility since my choices within the works were undermining those qualities. I was conveying what I felt was the tenuous nature of the work, a sense of fragility and impermanence in the face of the common belief that ceramics is solid and permanent. At the same time the works started to address issues outside of traditional pottery such the ramifications of the choices we make, and the irreversible changes that result.

With the abandonment of the ceramic form's functionality, I began to move towards making forms from memory, forms that referenced previous works but were no longer present, and forms that referenced natural phenomena that tended towards dissolution (Figure 6). While still using ceramic elements (porcelain), I constructed objects with a non-ceramic method, mechanically attaching them to each other with zip ties (Figure 7). The reasoning behind this was two-fold. I wanted a methodology that was quick, and one in which the work could be cut apart and the parts re-utilized into new work. In a discussion with Morgan Kennedy, he suggested that zip ties might be the solution, and they worked perfectly. The work shifted from being 'permanent' object-driven to that which was process-driven. The works came together, and then came apart, only to return to the individual elements they were at the start of each piece. The need for more and more element pieces began to weigh heavy in the process to fuel more work.

This allowed new work to be developed including short videos and the exploration of alternative sculptural materials like ice. The videos explore the dissolution of the object over



Figure 8

time and it's returning to the state being before it became an object for display (Figure 8). The works were created from memory, and then disassembled, only to return to memory. The works in ice existed for only a very short time, leaving only a memory. In the piece below, the bones made of ice are placed in an unfired ceramic bowl, melt, and in time fill the bowl with water which then dissolves the bowl itself. It happens quite quickly leaving only the residue of what was, and a memory. With this work I continued to move farther away from traditional object oriented ceramics into experience based, process-driven work where the object is just a bridge to

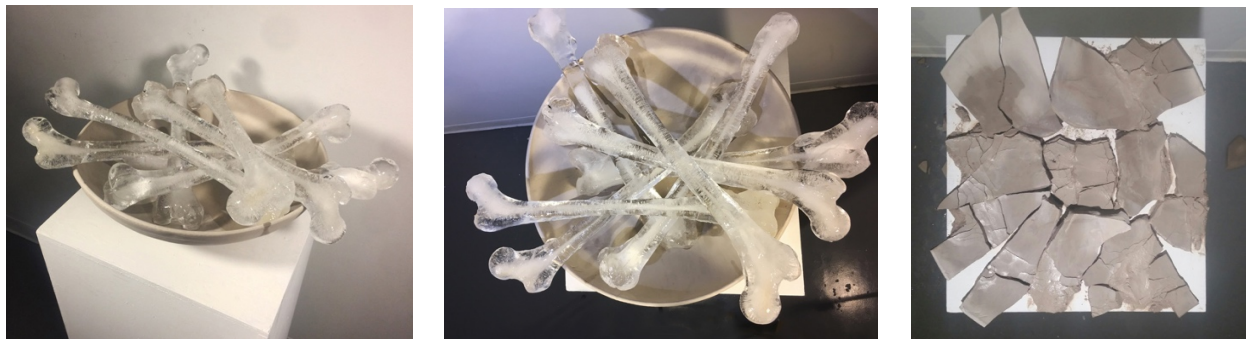


Figure 9

memory. Questions repeatedly arose for me. "If the objects were to disappear, would I have lost anything? If I lost everything, would I be any different as an individual? What defines me?". Or more to the point, "What do I use to define myself?". Experiences.



## LISTENING AND ALLOWING: AN INVITATION

In reflecting on these questions of self definition, I returned to my reasons for returning to school, entering an MFA program, and engaging critically with others. The underlying reason was dialogue and connection. Nicolas Bourriaud underscores dialogue and connection in *Relational Aesthetics*, "...art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue." (Bourriaud, p15). As I moved further into process oriented work, I considered that my work with the public in such events as the Jackson County Youth Arts Festival, the Western North Carolina Pottery Festival, Pots on the Green, and Empty Bowls. In each of those events over the years, the participants could only take with them the memory of the experience of making since none of their work could be retained or saved. We would talk about that, and chatted about things they liked, etc... and I came to understand through our conversations that what they were doing, the making something that was theirs, with their own hands, was an experience that carried a seed of something important.

Looking to explore further the emphasis experience of making over the retaining of the object, I set up a project in Asheville for the *Interslopers* show that was to take place on the streets of the South Slope area of Asheville. The concept behind the show was that participating artists involved would create their works using the streets of South Slope as a pop up gallery. My piece focused on engaging the public to make works, their works, to be displayed throughout South Slope. I set up a potters wheel with a generator in an abandoned building, and waited for passers-by to find me. When they stumbled upon me, I would invite them to have a seat and make something. But there was a catch. They could not keep what they made. I asked them to display it somewhere in the local area, photograph their installation, and then reflect and comment on their experience (Figure 10). Participants and groups engaged with me over two

days, and their work was displayed until it dissolved, leaving only the memory of the experience and its documentation. Their reflections, sent with photos of their installs to me via their phones speak of the value they placed on the experience, many of whom this was their first encounter with clay, of making something, and then displaying it for others to enjoy.



Figure 10

Taking this a bit further, in my next project I engaged individuals for a much longer period of time working collaboratively on the construction of sculptures. In this project, the participant could choose from a selection of porcelain elements of different dimensions and shapes and then zip tie these pieces together to create a form or sculpture. In many ways these pieces are like conversations. One person starts the conversation (often my guest), and then I would match that piece by placing one of my own into the work (Figure 11). In this manner the piece evolves into a sculpture comprised of 40-70 elements or more, and is totally spontaneous. It is impossible to foresee what will be built because it is entirely dependent on the choices made during the conversation (Figures 12-15). For my own part, I practice listening and allowing while facilitating the process without dominating or trying to control the outcome. In this way, the piece is not object oriented, but relationally oriented. In being relationally oriented, dialogue and

connections made while the engagement is underway is the actual piece. The object is just a meeting point for interaction and transformation. This follows along with comments made by Maria Elena Buszek regarding Bourriaud's position on the object being "but is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination". The object links us to thoughts, memories, sensations, histories, and relationships rather than being an end in itself with a predetermined meaning." (Buszek, p84).



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

My current work continues with this trend of participatory engagement. While the previous work involved the dialogue and connection that happens between two individuals involved in a collaboration, the new work involves a project of a much larger scope. First, the work is designed to create a specific space, one that is dedicated to only to the process of engagement and the creation of an object where the object is a mediating element for human interaction and dialogue. The number of people involved will be much greater and the process will take place over a much longer period of time, the duration of the exhibition in which the work will be displayed. During that time, visitors to the show will be invited to participate in building a sculpture using 2,020 pieces of cast porcelain. These elements will be held in twenty four boxes held on twelve steel stands forming a circle around a work area holding a low table on

which the work takes place. Suspended above the work area there will be steel ring with 12 lights embedded into it that will illuminate the boxes below. The steel ring is dimensioned to mirror the the perimeter of the space is defined by the boxes of porcelain elements. There will be a central light hung high above that will illuminate the work area of the table. In this way the ring and the boxes with stands will define a space intended for one use, that of engaging the viewer to participate as a collaborative partner in the project (Figure 16).

The layout of the space reflects the twelve points on a clock face and references both time and spaces that are considered significant for the local culture. An example would be Stonehenge, or a spiritual site. The clock face layout, the number of elements provided (2,020), and the manner in which they are presented and consumed by the piece reference time and its passing. During the course of the exhibition, all the pieces will be utilized, choices will become limited, and eventually, the boxes will stand empty. In a sense, time will have run out.

The 2,020 objects that are presented for the construction of the work are made of cast porcelain. The pieces could be made of many materials such as cast aluminum, wood, or plastic, but each material choice carries it's own context of familiar materiality. The porcelain has qualities that reference several contexts at one time. Often they are perceived as bones, or ribs, as elements of the body. More abstractly, they can be seen as schools of fish, flocks birds in flight, or just linear gestures in space. The porcelain pieces' organic shapes relate to nature and move against a context of the man-made, or the built environment with it's straight lines, angles, and precise curves. The choice to limit the diversity of organic shapes was to give a homogeneity to the structure of the final form created, and give a sense of commonality to the visitor/participant. While there is incredible diversity in our world, there are also similarities we share. We have a body and bones, we walk through a shared world, and we are connected through time to others.

Upon entering the gallery, a visitor can move around the perimeter of the installation, view works that were completed collaboratively by others, and read reflections posted on the wall by those who have been involved in the project. During specific times each day, I will be in the gallery to engage with visitors and to invite them to participate in the project. When I cannot be present, others will take my place to engage visitors to the gallery. Once in the work area, we will work together for however long they like, and they can talk with me or others who are currently working on the piece. When they have finished their contribution to the work, they will be invited to sit on benches provided, and write their reflections on their part in the piece and the process. Their reflections will then be posted along the wall just above the benches for others to read and consider. After the work is complete, it will be systematically dismantled piece by piece with all the elements returning to the boxes they were in initially. The entire process will be documented as well as the reflections of those who participated, since given its transitory nature, it is doubtful that the work will ever be completed again in exactly the same way.



Figure 16

## CONCLUSION

Throughout my research here at Western Carolina University, I have contemplated the sensations of something which informs the work that I do, and the perceptions of the work that I see from others. Some works resonate with me and others do not. Is this a matter of taste or aesthetic? What is informing my work and the positions I take within it? Many have said that in viewing a work, they can see a quality that bears the mark of my involvement, however tangential. In hunting down the answer and striving to move deeper into the work to find that which informs it, I believe it is a trace of memory, a fragment of experience which informs how I view the world. This is why the answer to a question posed earlier can only be "No, I would be no different." Objects go away, but experiences are completely portable. They are woven into us.

But what of everyone else? Is there a commonality of my experience to that of others? In investigating this question by following a path of engagement and collaboration, I came to appreciate the complexity of the issue of experience and personal narratives. Listening became the greater part of dialogue. As Brett Cook states in an interview with Tom Finkelpearl "Dialogue with empathy is another part of the craft of collaborative practice that takes one outside of the object alone and outside of oneself." (Finkelpearl, p299). In engaging others, there was a yielding, a letting go of outcome and a focus on the engagement itself. Jacques Ranciere identifies a work of art as a 'third term', an intermediary object to which the artist and the viewer can find common ground (Bishop, p38). In this way the object becomes a relational medium, to a greater experience of the engagement itself. This experience is carried within the individual after they have left the object and moved on into their daily experience.

An important part of the experience of creating (and of engagement) is the choice whether to engage at all. This personal agency and taking of ownership in 'the doing' is what

makes the experience significant. Without it, the viewer remains a viewer, a passive spectator. Or perhaps a consumer. Once the viewer crosses over to being a maker, then the choices become real. The choices are *their* choices, and what they have in the end is what they put into it. Not everyone takes this seriously, but for those that do, it becomes more meaningful. The stronger and more meaningful the experience, the more lasting the impression on the individual.

My work has been both private, working alone in my studio, and more publicly oriented, working collaboratively with others. In seeking common ground, engagement depends on listening, and meeting others where they are. To make a lasting impression, the experience has to be a positive one. I have found that this is much easier when I let go of the outcome. The making of objects is often outcome based, and this also often runs counter a relational engagement (i.e. what I want vs. what you want). In acknowledging that objects are transitory, experience takes precedence. The quality of engagement, the connections made, and the 'making' itself become what's remembered (Figure 17). Through the act of creating, new memories are formed, elevating the experience of making and its importance to the individual to a level that supercedes the object created. And when the object is no longer present, it is this memory, its essence, that the individual will carry into the future.



Figure 17



## AFTERWORD: SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN A SOCIALLY DISTANCED WORLD

It goes without saying that we are in challenging times. Covid 19 has impacted each and every one of us. When confronted with the idea that my socially engaged work would now be missing the social aspect, and thereby rendering the engagement aspect null and void, I started to seek a new venue in which to connect with others.

This inspired me to take my socially engaged work into a realm that transcended the physical world, and move beyond the boundaries of the studio and the gallery. I decided to create a venue for interaction and engagement in cyberspace, in a virtual world online. To do this I am using 3D modeling software, in which I create an environment with the same context as that in which I would invite others to collaborate with me in the real world. At this point it is rather primitive. I cannot bring a visitor into my virtual world and have them operate the software at the same time that I am using it. Presently this engagement happens in a Zoom meeting. Those involved in the work can direct me as to where they want me to place items of their choosing by using their mouse to annotate on the shared Zoom screen. I can respond with my own choices. Once the piece is completed, I can then use the virtual sculpture as a roadmap to build it's double in the real world, and then share it with my co-authors of the piece. Eventually I would like to create a real VR experience where another person can enter the virtual world with me and having their own tools, we can create sculptures using a virtual reality platform such as Oculus Rift.

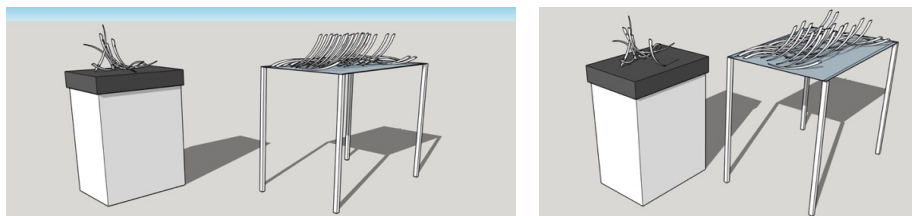


Figure 18



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